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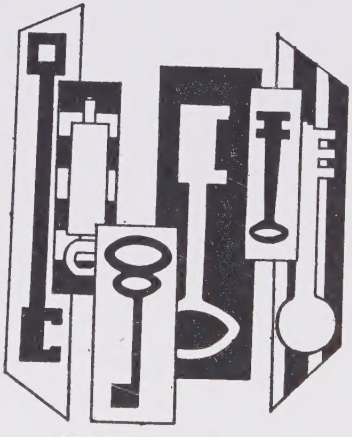

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An Essay in Epitaphs

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SOME OF US

An Essay in Epitaphs

BY

JAMES BRANCH CABELL

ΚΡΕ. ὡς οὐχ ὑπείξων οὐδὲ πιστεύσων λέγεις;
ΟΙΔ. * * * * *
—*Soph. Oed. Tyr.* 625

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COLUMBIA, MISSOURI

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James Branch Cabell

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For

VIRGINIA SHEPHERD DAVIS

who seems not altogether a stepchild

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I

DIZAIN OF THE DOOMED

A Note as to Amiable Agreements

"I WOULD much like here to speak frankly of my own generation in American letters. It was, pre-eminently, the generation which destroyed taboos,—not all taboos, of course, but a great many."

I — Dizain of the Doomed

It is always gratifying to obtain new disciples. Yet when I suggested, first in the *American Mercury* (for June 1929) and later in *The Way of Ecben,* that the American novelists of the Nineteen Twenties were ripening handsomely toward oblivion, I very certainly had not expected my opinions to be endorsed in dizzily high circles. I had never hoped, for example, to include among my more enthusiastic followers such notabilities as Messrs. Norman Foerster, Harry Hayden Clark, Frank Jewett Mather, Gorham B. Munson, Granville Hicks and Paul Elmer More.

Some of these names are strange to my provinciality. One infers, though, from the literary manner of all these, whose manners are perhaps rather exclusively literary, that each is a schoolmaster of prime importance. These then, and many others, have swarmed from quiet classrooms to expound upon my text uproariously; and the retiring of the novelists of the 'twenties has taken on the dignity

of a public movement supported even by the most obtuse of critical writers.

Still, zeal defeats itself over often. So in this crusade which I have had the dubious honor to inaugurate I would counsel my fellows to a somewhat more specious show of moderation, and even, if the thing can be managed, of civility and intelligence. I would urge that we of the " new humanism " for the future dispatch our appointed victims to the tumbril with the aloof politeness of a Robespierre rather than with the gross stultitudes of a Carrier. I would suggest that we might as well after all fill out the death warrants rationally. Let us agree, in brief, that Carthage must be destroyed without any more moronic deprecation of the doomed city's architecture.

What heads, to begin with, have been exalted high enough to repay lopping off? Who were the more offensively successful of American writers during the 'twenties? One may dismiss the poets, I think, since verse making is no longer a pursuit of the adult-minded. As concerns prose there is small room for dispute. To honor gallantly the ladies with precedence, the 'twenties gave and the 'twenties took away from us both Elinor Wylie and

Frances Newman. The 'twenties likewise revealed to us, really for the first time, the talents of Willa Cather and of Ellen Glasgow. During the 'twenties Sinclair Lewis made, in *Babbitt* and in *Main Street,* his two inestimable contributions, if not certainly to our literature, at least to our language. The other male writers of the period are customarily listed, in all the more fervent demands for their removal from serious consideration, as Dreiser and Cabell and Anderson. Then, too, the 'twenties gave us Joseph Hergesheimer, for all that my present co-workers in humanism have rather unaccountably failed to blacklist the author of *The Three Black Pennys.** It is a compliment which they have in no case neglected to pay H. L. Mencken, who has become involved in the pogrom less through his own imputed demerits than through his contumacious labors to make known and to increase the now deflated famousness of the other writers whom I have named.

* It has been suggested to me by Mr. Seward Collins of the *Bookman* that "Mr. Paul E. More has devoted a dozen lines to Mr. Hergesheimer, on page 62 of *Modern Currents in American Literature,*" — and one thankfully acknowledges the academic value of this information. Even so, because of my doubt if any aspersions printed that far on in a book by Mr. More can be regarded as actually published, I am permitting my original text to stand unaltered.

Thus then runs the dizain of the doomed. It is, of course, a list which might be extended. Indeed, no sooner have I recorded these ten names than at once (so utterly may over-many years of usage enslave one to the decimal system) some ten other names suggest themselves. I think forthwith of Carl Van Vechten and of George Jean Nathan. I recall, with warm personal gratitude, that Elmer Davis in 1928 entered new fields via the pages of *Giant Killer*. I remember that Ernest Hemingway and Thornton Wilder both came before the applauding public during the 'twenties. Even more important, to my finding, seems the fact that Thomas Beer began to publish during the 'twenties. Then too I regard with pleased perturbation no less than four " first books " which appear to me of virtually unlimited promise. I refer to Lorine Pruette's *Saint in Ivory,* and to Emily Clark's *Stuffed Peacocks,* and to Donald Corley's *The House of Lost Identity,* and to Louis Kronenberger's *The Grand Manner,* — each one of them a product of the later 'twenties, and each one of them at least perhaps denoting the start of a notable talent in creative letters.

I regard, I say, this second dizain; I recall yet other honorable names: and I can well see that from

a period so variously prolific as were the 'twenties in American literature no person can as yet pick the authors of actual importance. I therefore do not pretend to achieve the impossible. I select merely those ten who at this present moment in 1930 appear the more definitely to have ended, or to have neared the end of, a fairly complete career. I select those ten unfortunates of whom each has been so vastly overpraised, at one time or another, that now the amassed superlatives become plainly ridiculous. They become irritating. It is not merely that we are tired of hearing Aristides called The Just: we are tired, instead, of hearing justice and all other imaginable virtues glibly ascribed en masse, with all the graces thrown in. And we are just as heartily tired of whatsoever actual ability or accomplishment we may yet concede to these literary pets of the petulant 'twenties.

That much, of course, is true of every considerate being. With an especial virulence, however, does this tiredness rage among us of the " new humanism " whose proficient fingers toil to review the very latest books cleverly. To us the merits of these ten writers have far too long ago become an old story and an outmoded matter hoary beyond our hand-

ling. Here, although we professional reviewers be not wholly guiltless (in that the antiquity which we abhor is of our own aging), yet here does a little coat-turning come from a noble origin.

For such is the high and generous nature of most critics in regular practice, that they must throng eagerly to acclaim the first promissory notes of any young and unhackneyed writer with a fervor which mere reason would reserve for their settlement at maturity. I cannot recall offhand any moderately well done first novel which has escaped being hailed somewhere in print as quite the best book of its sort that Dr. William Lyon Phelps and at least one other person had read during the last ten years. I can think of no American critic of any real prominence and perceptible following who is not, as a working rule, far more than eager to make a mountain out of each pimple in the way of budding literary talent, and to exaggerate its exiguous merits to his last proud superlative.

All this most amiably bespeaks, beyond doubt, the great-heartedness of our professional reviewers toward the beginning writer. They aid the tyro: and to do that is a virtue. I lament only that these philanthropists should later be entrapped by their own

magnanimity, and denied the humane pleasures of truth-telling. For there comes about very quickly, through the generous endeavors of us who review books in a really readable way, the time when each writer's merits have been fully magnified. They have been made familiar to everybody through our sprightly and, as it were, our sophisticated critiques. The rub then is that we cannot any longer admit the existence of these merits except at the unconscionable cost of repeating what many persons, and even we ourselves, have said earlier. We confront, in brief, a matter of plain duty.

It is, we reflect, in no way a lively issue, it is but an axiom, that Mr. Hergesheimer always writes vividly, with an ever-present emphasis upon material beauty. It can startle nobody to hear that the wit of Mr. Mencken has again proved inexhaustible. Queen Anne, in brief, is dead: and though Mr. Dreiser still be very much alive, yet nowadays either fact seems equally important. No one of the superior gifts of these and yet other heroes of the 'twenties keeps in 1930 any tang of the surprising. Their better points have become, as a theme to write about, utterly pointless, now that everybody knows the peculiar talents of these especial authors, and has heard them

hymned so very often. For us overseers of polite letters to praise any one of their current books would entail the printing of an unarresting and repetitious review, agreeing entirely with what we said yesterday.

We confront a matter of plain duty. We perceive that we owe it alike to our employers and to our own good repute, as brisk fellows endowed with a mighty pretty wit, here to achieve gusto by deriding in a sprightly and sophisticated way all the quaint failings of these over-widely appreciated authors, and to malign them brightly in mere justice to ourselves. We then do our duty.

We do it, too, with zest. For we are quite honestly tired, I repeat, of whatsoever actual ability we may yet concede to any of the writers listed in my dizain of the doomed, now that their virtues have become truisms. The manner of each of them is formed, is perfected, and is known. A forthcoming book from any one of the eight who yet survive appears in all its essential features predictable. It cannot possibly affect us, we are persuaded, except as a bit of reiteration. As has been pointed out by a comparatively intelligent reviewer, we now know almost as surely what output to expect from Cabell or from Sinclair

Lewis as we know what to expect from the Packard or the Cadillac factories.

Such is, of course — barring death at some judiciously early age — the fixed lot of every writer by-and-by, in so far as his contemporaries may judge. Posterity remains as the supreme tribunal: yet in very few cases does it reverse a judgment of the lower court. Ordinarily, you will note, it is among the earlier productions of any author that posterity also finds his masterpiece. Meanwhile I have lamented, in another place, the fact that to his contemporaneous readers the work of any professional writer who has passed fifty appears perforce a book which they have already read time and again: and if I recur to this statement it is because this plain truism has been interpreted, through no logic known to me, as signifying that nobody over fifty has ever written a book worth publishing. It is an axiom to which, if but for chronological reasons, I would nowadays not care to commit myself, beyond the enforced admission that deplorably few persons have ever done anything to offset it.

I return from that sad reflection to my dizain of the doomed. And I regard (with a shrug) those light and trivial merits which, through the consid-

erations that I have named, have become unimportant. Even so, I propose first of all to concede these merits, in mere justice to the condemned, before going on to the more distinctively humanistic pursuits of fault-finding and excommunication.

II
SANCTUARY IN PORCELAIN
A Note as to Elinor Wylie

"THERE stood a summer-house dedicated to the goddess of Folly; this charming structure was, paradoxically enough, presided over by a bust of Marcus Aurelius and decorated with a motto from Montaigne."

II — Sanctuary in Porcelain

I perceive some merit in Elinor Wylie. That is not quite the natural gambit, perhaps. In any approach to the career of Elinor Wylie, it is most human to begin by asking, What would she have done next? The question is profitless, alike in that it can have no answer and in that even if the answer were in some miraculous way provided it would be to us of no more benefit than are last week's radio programs. With that peculiar sort of logic which distinguishes men from the higher apes as decisively as from the lower angels, one is drawn here to guess futilely at the unknowable, very much as Elinor Wylie herself was drawn to guess, through two whole novels, at the fine things which a spared Shelley would have done after 1822.

With Elinor Wylie the poet — I mean, with the poet who wrote in verse — I plan no traffic. I can find in her verses nothing very remarkable, but then that has for many years been my delinquency toward everyone's verses, all the long way from Hesiod's

and Pindar's to Mr. Edgar Guest's and my own. The tale runs otherwise as concerns that more urbane, that more prismatic, and in brief that so much more poetic poetry which, after the fashion of reformed and civilised poets, Elinor Wylie wrote in prose form. To no other woman save only Helen of Troy and that unaccountable person who imprudently married me have I been indebted for more of fond delight and of unanswered surmise.

I hark back toward the beginning of the 'twenties. In the autumn of 1923, I had the good luck to rank, along with Sinclair Lewis and Carl Van Vechten, as one of the " discoverers " of *Jennifer Lorn,* and to commend this story in the public prints (according to the testimony of my scrapbooks) as " compact of color and legerity and glitter." I find also that through the courtesy of Elinor Wylie's publishers I was likewise enabled at this time to praise in innumerous advertisements " the wistful humors and the fine prose " of *Jennifer Lorn.* Yet a little later, in 1925, it was my fortune to be, I think, the only unsilent admirer of *The Venetian Glass Nephew,* in the days when Elinor Wylie was dreeing the inevitable weird of every author who has scored an unlooked-for triumph in a more or less

new vein — which is, of course, to hear that the successful book's successor is nothing like so good. To my mind all conceivable exploits in the way of fantastic romance then seemed to lie well within the compass of this woman's refined and impeccant ability.

Much changes, however, both within and about us, during the course of five years. And since time, like an insane thief, robs all of all grief and disappointment eventually, there is now no hurt in conceding that *The Orphan Angel,* when it was published in 1926, affected me very much as, in the cliché at least, does a bucket of cold water full in the face. *The Orphan Angel* really did appear a most inane wasting of wood-pulp even for any book of the month club to be inflicting upon its broken-spirited customers. I raged before *The Orphan Angel.* I declared, as I still think, that the writing of *The Orphan Angel* was one of the most gloomy errors in all literary history. Yet out of an honest desire to avoid overstatement, I must humbly confess in this place that, after six most conscientious onslaughts, I have not ever been able to read *The Orphan Angel;* and so perhaps speak upon insufficient information.

When *Mr. Hodge and Mr. Hazard* appeared in 1928, then before the dreadful forerunning rumor that yet again Elinor Wylie had rescued Shelley from the Mediterranean the hearts of the merely rational sank. Yet I at least read tentatively; and was thus allured into a peace without victory. These pleasant and innocuous doings at Lyonnesse and Gravelow by no means revealed the Elinor Wylie of her first two romances; but that reflection was drowned, as this pertinacious woman simply would not permit Percy Bysshe Shelley to be drowned upon any terms, in the glad relief of noting that, even so, in this pensive galamatias of raspberries and Greek grammars and cream buns was nowhere involved the planet-struck Elinor Wylie of her third romance. In fine, one found all rather more than satisfying, in a relatively unimportant fashion; and common-sense did not demand over much of an author convalescing from a seizure so alarming as had been manifested in *The Orphan Angel.* It is upon her fifth story, I said, that the career of Elinor Wylie will pivot. Then came the news of her death and the knowledge that there would be no fifth story. Her progress stayed forever inconclusive. God alone, if one dare cite an authority so far out of touch

with current literature, can say what Elinor Wylie would have done next.

I elect to believe that had more of life been granted to her she would have gone on to write yet other books as pre-eminent in their own ornate way as are *Jennifer Lorn* and *The Venetian Glass Nephew.* I confess that my conviction here is not quite so strong as it is valueless. One cannot wholly put out of mind how very, very freely, in that disastrous *Orphan Angel,* Elinor Wylie had shown fatal gifts for being ineffectively humorous, and for confounding with the quaint that which to the candid seems unmistakably dull, and for reaching flat bathos where her avowed aim was seraphic beauty — and all this too in connection with an unbridled incapacity for self-criticism. Elinor Wylie honestly believed, as but too many of her friends learned at the cost of all friendship, that *The Orphan Angel* was an excellent fantasy made up of her finest endeavors.

Yet that delusion hardly matters now. One or two other authors have been known to extend the imperfections of their writing into their evaluations of it; and oblivion has triumphed where the Mediterranean failed. The dead past has swallowed tranquilly its dead, among whom I estimate to be that

not ever really alive *Orphan Angel;* and Elinor Wylie has bequeathed to us at least two books concerning which there can be no dispute by the intelligent.

These two books, *Jennifer Lorn* and *The Venetian Glass Nephew,* I regard, I admit, as something like true masterpieces in their own sharply limited romantic field. That field is not large nor is it especially lofty. Yet it now and then repays the thorny toil of bemused gardeners very prettily, with frail blossoms.

For there are, to my finding, two kinds of romance. They differ in their causes, in their materials, and in their purposes: they agree but as to the desirability of embellishing the course of human life as men actually do live it. There is that major romance which gilds actuality with the gold of a highly superior sun, as opposed to that minor romance over which one is tempted to say the moon presides, to ensorcel all with a wizardry of amiably prevaricating shadows and with vivid patterns of silver. I must here mix metaphors by admitting that sometimes this is only German silver, of no great intrinsic worth: but the patterns are very often exquisite.

There is, I mean, the normal, the wholesome, the

really childlike kind of romance in which the writer joyously accepts this world and the broad flowering ways of human life, but enlivens each with more propitious and with more picturesque happenings than occur in the ratio he depicts. Thus Scott worked, as Dumas did after him, in a pleased quest of the improbable. These titans we may reasonably acclaim the supreme masters in this kind of romance writing. And they embellished human life because they loved it. They adorned it with superb adventures in precisely that frame of mind in which the favored lover brings jewels to his mistress. They wrote, in short, as happy persons alone may write in a complacent glow of prosperity. Both of them performed their great labors in days of semi-fabulous success and material well-being, when the masters of Abbotsford and of the Château de Monte Cristo held each his princely court, in entire financial stability, and went with critical fanfares among applauding underlings. Yet a little later, in the more prosaic presence of bankruptcy, that necromancy which had summoned up Rob Roy could evoke but Count Robert of Paris, and across the forsaken battle fields of the three musketeers the Whites and the Blues wavered like paralytic phantoms. When once

life had proved unlovable, and misfortune had touched these mages heavily, it would seem that their magic failed. When Walter Scott and Alexandre Dumas could no longer love life with complete confidence, and with a boisterous optimism as to all life's orderings, then they could write of life but haltingly. One is tempted to infer that the major romance is a tropic growth which does not thrive in the inclement zones of fortune. It is a branch of literature to which, in any case, do not belong *Jennifer Lorn* and *The Venetian Glass Nephew.*

For there is, to the other side, that quite different kind of romance which embellishes life because the writer has found life to be unendurably ugly. It embellishes life very much as one might cover the face of a leper. The origin of all such romance writing is thus appreciably removed from being love, in that if it be not entirely hate it is, at mildest, aversion. It demands, with Baudelaire, the inaccessible places and strange adorers: with Flaubert it seeks for new perfumes, for vaster flowers, and for pleasures not ever before attained. Its goals are not of this world. It does not hunt the improbable: it evokes in desperation that which it over well knows to be impossible.

We call this — dully enough — " the literature of escape." Brisk gentlemen rather more enamored of a striking phrase than of strict veracity have even been known to commend it as the literature of something like blasphemy. For it is, say these tremendous fellows, a literature composed by persons almost equally tremendous who have found the globe they inhabit and the unappreciative mammals about them to be the productions of a most inferior and ill inspired Author. Its poetry is thus in exact truth a criticism of life, a criticism of the stout old slashing *Edinburgh Review* school, which begins with the time-hallowed formula " This will never do! " It is a poetry — a " making " — which thereafter goes on to set a better example (for the instruction of a no doubt properly impressed Providence) by creating a really acceptable sort of world exhilarated by congenial inhabitants. Thus say these godlings, where we calmer communicants incline to rather less of a pother, in the light of our private knowledge that books after all are only books, even if the Trinity have much time for reading.

We may grant, nevertheless, that this kind of romance writing is a poetry — a " making " — to which the unhappy contribute. They contribute so

widely and so very variously that where a wastrel like Marlowe from out of his pot-house squalor may augment this branch of literature with a *Hero and Leander,* a restrained schoolmaster like Charles L. Dodgson, from out of the forlorn stuffiness of that atmosphere which is thought most suitably to develop the minds of the young, will bring forth an *Alice in Wonderland*. We may grant also that this is a branch of literature to which, through plain enough reasons, do belong *Jennifer Lorn* and *The Venetian Glass Nephew.*

I must here of necessity approach to matters which as yet stay delicate. It suffices to remark that the corporal life of Elinor Wylie was but too often at odds with her circumstances. The nature of this very beautiful and tragic woman was not ever in all adapted to that makeshift world in which perforce moved her superb body. She had found, after marrying several of them, that this world was over full of disappointments. She, who possessed the needed ability and an urgent need to use it, created therefore quite another sort of world, building amid desolation a baroque pagoda to be the sanctuary of wounded dreams and unfed desires. She created, in brief, a retreat wherein the rebuffed might encoun-

ter no more inglorious fiascos of the spirit and of the affections.

Into this quaint and brittle sanctuary of Elinor Wylie's creation neither the spirit nor the affections, or any other human plague, may enter, for the reason that there is in this sparkling place no human heart. For not only Rosalba and Virginio, but all the other inhabitants likewise, I take to be handsome porcelain figures animated by a pure and hurtless white magic. They have been shaped and colored with a pleasingly faded elegance. They have been given life: but there is no more blood in them than there is grossness. They enact their well-bred comedy, which includes a toy misery or so. It touches now and then the exaltedly tragic as if with a caress. A few of them may even pretend to die, with unruffled decorum. Their little porcelain tongues lend to their speaking a light stiffness whensoever these fine manikins converse. They converse too in their own idiom, for the vernacular of this point-device land is an ever-courteous blending of ironic epigram and neat periods and apt literary allusions. Yet a discerning audience will watch all with the connoisseur's calm approval. For this, we know, is but a make-believe land of animated figurines,

wherein not lust nor death, not poverty nor bankrupt love, but the cool joys of virtuosity, and of finesse, and of each tiny triumph in phrase-making, are the sole serious matters.

For one, I still delight in the wistful humors and the fine prose of this little land: I commend to you, as I said at outset, the color and the legerity and the glitter of this sanctuary against the rude real. Yet I am far from declaring that oncoming ages will forever treasure these books, or even that these books will through any great while survive the perished 'twenties. For tastes change: and in art also, we incline to forget our benefactors. It is on the cards that very few, and perhaps none, of our descendants may care to travel with Jennifer Lorn all the exotic long way of her journeying (even from the spring sunlight of Devonshire to the crimson pillows of the unvirtuous Banou's bed) or to advance happily with Rosalba Berni from the classical summer-house at Altichieri into the fires of the smelting furnace at Sèvres. Posterity, I admit, may forget both of these books. But I add that posterity will thus acquire a quite valid claim on our pity.

III

SHADES OF PURPLE

A Note as to Frances Newman

"BESIDES my own personal fondness for purple, so many people associate me with the color that I think it has a real commercial value. If the book has a second printing, can't you make it purple?"

III — Shades of Purple

I perceive some merit in Frances Newman. I admit of course that in the attempt at any surmise as to how much was lost to American letters in 1928 through her premature swift death, all guesswork becomes an act of faith. As a fixed fact we know only that no career has sped more brilliantly than did her career through its brief, bright season in the fled 'twenties.

The corrosive and sparkling essays in literary criticism, followed by the glittering periods of *The Short Story's Mutations,* and capped with that shining minor masterpiece, flawless in all save in its most abominable title, *The Hard-Boiled Virgin,* — here is a progression as clear, and as light, and as unwavering, as is the ascent of a rocket. Then, just as is the way of rockets, this soaring burst into the multi-colored and dazzling and diffused and unordered and slowly descending scintillations of *Dead Lovers Are Faithful Lovers.* And that was all.

The analogue appears complete: but the few of us

who knew Frances Newman are as yet not quick to be consoled by the trimness of a rhetorical figure.

I may with some reason declare myself to have been one of those not over many persons who did know her, with at any rate that tempered intimacy which is permitted between human beings. Each line which she had published I had read. She had told me, in some detail, of her plans against that future which chance was to deny. Since 1920 (when her neat attacks upon my uninventiveness, and upon my literary methods in general, first astringently charmed me in, of all unpredictable places, the *Atlanta Constitution*), I had been convinced of her acumen and of her ability and of the ultimate perfection of her fine art. The upshot is that I can feel no such uncertainty as beclouds all surmises about what might have been Elinor Wylie's future. I today believe, simply and quite surely, that had some five years more of living been accorded to Frances Newman she would have stayed remembered, not merely as unique, but as supreme among the women writers of America. Yet — as I must here repeat, — this belief is now, as it must now forevermore remain, an act of faith unbuttressed by valid material evidence. This woman of unmistakable genius has

left, in the disorderly cemetery of all the talents which is American literature, not any memorial which is worthy of that genius.

It is equally true she has left no peers. Ellen Glasgow alone, in an arena more wide and more humane and a thought less restrainedly " literary," has continued to demonstrate that women, at least now and then, may write far better than do their appointed prey. But in that more intimately personal and — since I can here contrive no escape from the defaced and tawdry word — in that more sophisticated field wherein Frances Newman very lovingly reared what she described as " the ripe olives " of literature there has appeared not any feminine successor.

Meanwhile, the books of Frances Newman, her cool and gay and perverse and yet wistful books, remain. The chief among them I take to be *The Hard-Boiled Virgin,* — a volume which has, so far as I know, not any exact parallel in all English.

There exists indeed but one other English book which, to my finding, in aught resembles it. Even here, the likeness is so remote from being superficial that it necessarily tends to escape detection. For I refer to *Marius the Epicurean* — that leisured history of an alert mind's adventurous progress among

sensations and ideas as that progress is observed through what Frances Newman has called "the cool violet twilight of Walter Pater's prose." And I find the chance natural enough that Frances Newman should here have linked with Pater a shade of that purple which in all its varied shades she loved most irrationally, and with which she became identified in the minds of all who knew her. That she did not ape Pater is sufficiently obvious. But she took over his odd method of narration; and she applied it triumphantly to her own needs.

For to well-balanced persons, who are not unduly excitable about the integrity of a somewhat inconspicuous membrane, *The Hard-Boiled Virgin* remains always the story of Katherine Faraday's alert progress among sensations and ideas viewed through the highly individual prose of Frances Newman. It is a prose which has had a great deal more of criticism than of comprehension. For my part, I affirm that I do most heartily admire its startling precision. As John Macy has well observed (about quite another writer) "each sentence will be found, upon scrutiny, to contain, admirably, each thing in its place, the entire idea." To the other side, a not negligible amount of ever-

present scrutiny is demanded of the reader if he is to grasp any idea at all. I think, in brief, that the merits of Frances Newman's prose style are most intimately involved with the merits of her reader. For some readers this style is excellent; for others, it is but an abomination before the Lord God of Sabaoth and all the fundamental rules of thesis writing as communicated in high schools. A mentally alert reader who is, in the old phrase, not afraid of work will derive from this manner of writing an athletic pleasure, where other good souls will merely wonder what the woman is driving at and decide that, anyhow, it must be something unusually obscene. The elaborated diction of Frances Newman thus very often expresses her ideas more exactly than it conveys them.

As concerns the book itself, since time has in no way changed my opinion, I shall hark back to what I said when *The Hard-Boiled Virgin* was first published. " This appears to me the most brilliant, the most candid, the most civilised, and — always within the limits of its chosen field — the most profound book yet written by an American women. You have here — for, to be sure, the discerning and the tolerably tolerant reader alone — a small master-

piece." Each of my two qualifications, I think, as each is tendered between dashes, has an importance which the reviewers of 1926 somewhat shrilly ignored: but for the rest, all that I declared then, upon the dust-jacket of *The Hard-Boiled Virgin,* I still believe to be the truth.

You will find that *Frances Newman's Letters,* as they were collected and edited by Mr. Hansell Baugh in 1929, reveal to a sufficing degree her personality. I have said elsewhere that these letters endure, if but as a shadow of that strange and ever ardent personality, yet as a shadow very vitally shaped. It still appears to me that, whatsoever may be lacking in *Frances Newman's Letters* of the quick opulence of glitter and color which those who knew the living woman are not likely ever to put out of mind, these letters yet disclose a peculiarly just pen-and-ink sketch of Frances Newman, wherein the drawing is wholly frank and unstudiedly true.

Even so, these letters do not disclose, to my finding, that rather timid, that somehow rebuffed, and that yet pre-eminently headstrong child who seemed to me to survive always in Frances Newman, and to play, in a kind of enforced braggadocio seasoned

everywhere with a bit of uneasiness, at being grown up. It was this child who, throughout the woman's career as a writer, upon every hand acquired enemies with a pertinacity and a large unreason which I have not before or since observed in any other human living.

I do not mean only that a hyper-sensitive South objected, as a matter of course, to her truth-speaking. I allude, rather, to that somewhat incomplete affection which was felt for Frances Newman by the most of her fellow writers. It can perhaps be best described by saying that, among the wild tribes who barter printed words for bread and beverages, her book reviews had very soon acquired for her such cherishing as men accord to the rattlesnake.

The trouble here was that as a literary critic Frances Newman had no dislikes: instead, at the first wakening of distaste, she passed forthwith into a derisory shrill loathing. Her standards were too exigent — and, I sometimes thought, a little too painstakingly "civilised" — ever to have been applied to the mild merits of her more prominent contemporaries. She none the less applied them, ruthlessly, with the unavoidable outcome. And there was thenceforward, in so far as she was concerned,

no touch of virtue in the condemned. All to her eyes was vile, save only that which lay open to the much more dreadful charge of being naïve.

It followed that, when she had spoken her fill, the excoriated did not love her. It followed, too, that the news of her death was a cordial and a very scantly disguised relief to many of the most dependable contributors to the lists of the best selling books.

To the other side, I have known of no more amiable companion, nor, upon the whole, of a critic more fair, more finely discriminating, or more richly sympathetic, in all literary matters wherein was engaged some whit of her personal liking. She truly loved sound literature, with an appreciativeness that remained, always, sound. She was, in fact, one of the very few, she was one of the perhaps half-dozen known persons writing in America during the 'twenties who could at all distinguish between good writing and extremely bad writing.

Here her wide erudition in some seven literatures came into play; and presented in Frances Newman the odd and indeed unique spectacle of a most legible and lively reviewer of books who had read several books published before 1900, and who did not settle all literary values by the touchstones of illimi-

table ignorance. She displayed, to the contrary, in her so numerous book reviews much of the solid and the soundly based scholarship of a Stuart Pratt Sherman, or of a Henry Seidel Canby, without the alkaline flat flavor of the pedagogue's smugness, and with the agreeable additions of mental independence and of a sense of humor. It follows that, here also, she left no successor.

Meanwhile, through all the acrimonies of her book-reviewing, the loyalties of Frances Newman remained firm, to a degree very far beyond the normal reach of the auctorial temperament. Such was a foible which often caused her, even in that vast battue which is the body of her critical writings, to award vexed, civil amnesties to books that her high and her quite adamantean standards had found to be, in point of fact, regrettable missteps. As to this matter, I find that in *Frances Newman's Letters* Mr. Baugh has charitably suppressed a large deal of evidence. Yet I may at least record that the attempts of Frances Newman to conceal — in print — her actual sentiments toward a romance entitled *Something About Eve* appeared to this novel's author rather more than heroic. And for the rest — although I shall, in a polite and prudent emulation

of Mr. Baugh, here mention no names, — I could tell very much the same story as to some dozens of other books by writers of whose writings she, in the main, approved.

Her eyes remained clear, her judgment stayed unbiased: it was merely that in such instances her disappointment kept an official silence. I do not mean, as heaven well knows, that the offender was spared in her private conversation. I mean only that, as went her published comments, the disliked book was chillily laid out in state under a pall of nicely embroidered phrases, instead of being massacred in type with the distinctive and so neatly murderous Newman touch. . . . " Frances, not the Cardinal," as she delighted to quote.

I look back upon the eight years wherein we two were familiar. I recall many moments, between the afternoon that she first appeared at Dumbarton Grange with a list of the questions she wished to ask, — all written out, upon a folded sheet of purple paper, so that not any question might be forgotten, — and the last afternoon in Richmond when, after we had said good-by, she ran back up the porch steps, so completely radiant and so completely clothed in purple, to the end that she might

embarrass me with an anecdote which with especial care had been saved up for my confusion, and which I came thus near to not ever hearing. For not ever again was I to hear the small and the inexpressibly tired voice of Frances Newman speaking in shrewd malice very plaintively.

I recall, I say, many moments. I can recall, though, no moment in which Frances Newman was not flaringly alive and most deeply interested, if but with disapproving and hard violence, in one or another human happening. And I cannot yet believe that so much of unresting animation is now forever quieted, nor that so much of vivid genius has gone out of our world without leaving any memorial of that genius which can appear quite worthy to those of us who, in any important sense, knew Frances Newman.

IV
REMARKS IN TRANSIT
A Note as to Willa Cather

"WHAT a beautiful voice she had, this Mlle. Olive, and how nobly it dealt with the English tongue. He would like to say something, but out of so much . . . what? He remained silent, therefore."

IV — Remarks in Transit

I perceive some merit in Willa Cather. So, for that matter, do a vast number of more competent judges, who have praised with all fit ardor those sincerely fashioned books by Miss Cather which signally graced the 'twenties. The drawback in so far as I am concerned is that with a deal of Miss Cather's writing I stay unfamiliar. Her that puts in the very best of company, along with Dante and Cervantes and Fielding and still other fine geniuses: but me it puts only in an awkward dilemma.

Miss Cather was by general consent one of the leading writers of the 'twenties. Miss Cather is an important part of my theme. Nevertheless, so constantly do the normal pleasures of life evade an industrious author that I have read as yet only a fraction of Miss Cather's work. It follows, with the pat inevitability which is the trade-mark of our plainer failures in duty, that I am not qualified to report upon her work as a whole. I wistfully surrender that privilege to my superiors in industry.

V

TWO SIDES OF THE SHIELDED

A Note as to Ellen Glasgow

"No woman could tell what life meant. But, after all, it was the same life, rippling, sparkling, or smothered. It was the same life, and it was hers. It was hers, and what she had learned from it was that keeping respectable was not so easy as some people imagine."

V — Two Sides of the Shielded

I perceive some merit in Ellen Glasgow. And here indeed I appear to have confrères. A definitive collection of the Works of Ellen Glasgow has very happily begun, with the publishing of revised versions of four of her novels of Southern life, and with yet four other of her books announced for immediate inclusion in this handsome Old Dominion Edition. The event is fortunate. It is praiseworthy, if but as indicating a vague elementary justice to exist now and then even in literary affairs.

For the belatedness of Ellen Glasgow's general recognition as the foremost woman novelist of America seems nowadays quite extraordinary. She had been publishing for twenty-eight years with a considerable if varying meed of popular success. Her vogue, even as a Southern writer, was distinctively third-rate, with Miss Mary Johnston and Mr. Henry Sydnor Harrison well in the lead. In fact, throughout these twenty-eight years Ellen Glasgow had published as if it were in the obscuring shadow of the

famousness and the large sales of Mary Johnston. Ellen Glasgow was considered, if at all, in connection with Mary Johnston. Ellen Glasgow was that other Virginian woman who wrote books: and some of her books had in their season been fairly popular.

Thus matters stood until the appearance of her fifteenth novel, when the 'twenties were well under weigh. *Barren Ground* was brought out, in the spring of 1925. Then alone did it occur to anyone of any least importance — so far as I know — to appraise seriously the work of Ellen Glasgow by any æsthetic canons.

For *Barren Ground* was unmistakably the work of a very actual and a highly competent artist. Its sales, they tell me, were not enormous: but it got for Miss Glasgow that intelligent sort of consideration which she had prodigally earned without ever receiving. It introduced her, in fine, to what I have seen described as the intelligentsia; and an appreciative audience thus found in her earlier books also those signal virtues and the adroit craftsmanship which Ellen Glasgow had cultivated for so long without critical detection. Meanwhile she was publishing *The Romantic Comedians* and *They Stooped to Folly,* with an accompaniment of ever

increasing plaudits now that the proper superlatives to apply to her were known by all the better-class reviewers.

The belatedness of this recognition, I repeat, seems nowadays extraordinary. Yet I think too there is to be found in the earlier work of Ellen Glasgow the influence of certain modes, then current, each one of which made directly for the timely and popular appeal of the book at the date of its publication, and each of which, as literary fashions shifted, had tended to hide the book's real merits as a work of art. Those early books were very, very, and yet again very, generously proportioned: the general book-buying public is always favorably impressed by a visibly long book, if but upon the thrifty principle of getting your money's worth. When these books were written, the ghost of Thomas Nelson Page still haunted everybody's conception of the South, keening in Negro dialect over the Confederacy's fallen glories: yet another Sentimental Tommy had made familiar the canny dialect of Thrums; and many persons were reading the Wessex novels of Thomas Hardy with an admiration which appears inexplicable. In brief, these earlier stories of Southern life were written at a time when novels in dialect were

prevailingly popular. Moreover, these books were written at a time when all American novels ended happily, just as a matter of course.

These things are trivial. These things are, in every case, extraneous to the main matter of the book wherein they occur. Yet it was just these things, I think, which for so long a season had combined to make many of those earlier books by Ellen Glasgow appear, to the casual eye, somewhat stolid and wholesome looking, a great while after stolidity and wholesomeness had been expunged from the list of possible literary virtues. Today, of course, we know that Ellen Glasgow was never stolid, and that wholesome is precisely the last adjective which any patriotic Southerner would ever hurl at her. Today we recognize that in these superficial matters Ellen Glasgow conformed to the mode of her day very much as she then wore her beautiful bronze hair à la Pompadour. My point is merely that it was these things, I think, which delayed the recognition of Ellen Glasgow's importance.

My point is furthermore that in the definitive edition these very things have been remedied. I remark that both the occasional over-plus of length and the occasional superabundance of dialect have been

STEPHENS COLLEGE
COLUMBIA, MISSOURI

attended to most dexterously. Miss Glasgow has proved an accomplished surgeon. She has amputated. She has lightened. It is as though she had blown dust from the pages. She has, in brief, improved matters wonderfully. And though her happy endings remain perforce unchanged, yet when Maria Fletcher returns to the ex-convict " through the sunbeams," in *The Deliverance,* and when in *The Battle-Ground* Dan and Betty " begin all over again, but this time together," it appears the course of wisdom to regard these ultimate sentences as an over-sweet liqueur at the end of a highly satisfactory banquet.

For the banquet is there. You have in the works of Ellen Glasgow something very like a complete social chronicle of the Piedmont section of the State of Virginia since the War Between the States, as this chronicle has been put together by a witty and observant woman, a poet in grain, who was not at any moment in her writing quite devoid of malice, nor of an all-understanding lyric tenderness either, and who was not through any tiniest half-moment deficient in a very consummate craftsmanship. What we have here, to my first finding, seemed a complete natural history of the Southern gentlewoman, with

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every attendant feature of her lair and general habitat most accurately rendered. But reflection showed the matter to be more pregnant than I had at the outset suspected; for the actual theme of Ellen Glasgow, the theme which in her writing figures always, if not exactly as a relentless Frankenstein's monster, at least as a sort of ideational King Charles's head, I take to be The Tragedy of Everywoman, as it was lately enacted in the Southern States of America.

You will note that almost always, after finishing any book by Ellen Glasgow, what remains in memory is the depiction of one or another woman whose life was controlled and trammeled and distorted, if not actually wrecked, by the amenities and the higher ideals of Southern civilization. The odd part of this is that it so often seems a result unplanned by the author, and, more often than not, a result which by no system of logic could result from the formal "story" of the book. It is merely that, from the first, Ellen Glasgow has depicted women, and in some sort all women, as the predestined victims of male chivalry. That is a creed, whether it be true or not, to which her faith has been given with a fervency no other creed has ever awakened in her inhumanly logical nature: it follows that whenso-

ever she touches upon this creed, if but in passing, her fervor blazes. And the most tiny flash of it stays unforgettable.

I turn, for example, to the earliest written of the four books which open the Old Dominion Edition. When all the story of *The Battle-Ground* is gone by, what I recall most clearly are the contented bustlings about of Bettie Ambler and of Mrs. Lightfoot after being rescued from the pampered estate of well-to-do Southern gentlewomen by the realities of warfare. These ladies, as you may remember, when once they had been released from that sheltered exaltation, got a sort of picnicking delight out of the uncivil realities by which men were appalled. "But then the Major," as Mrs. Lightfoot observes, forgivingly, as to her husband, "is a romantic at heart, and he is still surprised when human nature acts like human nature." Thus clearly did Ellen Glasgow state her main complaint against men, as far back as in 1902. She has repeated it since, time and again, with accents which have steadily lessened in condonation.

Then, too, what remains in memory after *The Deliverance* has been finished is that incisively symbolic figure of Mrs. Blake, blind and forever imprisoned in an ancient tall chair — an heirloom, of

course, — and kept drugged with chivalrous lies. *Virginia* is, throughout, quite frankly an account of the futile antics of that shielded and stainless wife and mother who is indigenous to the post-prandial oratory of politically gifted Southrons. This story of Virginia Pendleton is, in short, the tragicomedy of the woman who conforms in all things to our best Southern notions of womanly perfection. There is no pressing need to inquire through what chance its leading character was christened Virginia. And lastly, *They Stooped to Folly* is the tragicomedy of the woman who conforms to one especial Southern gentleman's desires as a sexual animal rather than to the ideals of his sex as a whole. But the point is that, to Miss Glasgow's finding, the conformist and the non-conformist to men's chivalrous delusions about women are punished with equal severity. Where the one is drowned in reprobation, the other is stifled in mind and spirit, with in either case man's chivalry serving as the executioner.

I shall not further pursue this distressing theme. Yet I think of Angelica Blackburn, in *The Builders,* inane and ruthless and secure upon that pedestal to which Southern chivalry has lifted the Southern lady; and of her elder, very near kinswoman, An-

gela Gay, in *The Miller of Old Church,* who had surrendered all rights and obligations in order to grasp more effectively at the privileges of an invalid Southern lady, from whom must be hidden away all unpleasant happenings; and of Angela's sullen spinster sister, also, whose career as an artist had been denied her by the circumstance that " it was out of the question for a Virginia lady to go off by herself and paint perfectly nude people in a foreign city." I think of Dorinda Oakley, in *Barren Ground,* and of her life-long conflict with male notions as it was fought out in the Commonwealth of Virginia. I think of that fine desiccating flower of Southern womanhood, Amanda Lightfoot, in *The Romantic Comedians,* — who had herself not ever any need to think about anything, because all had been decided for her by the appropriate feelings of a lady and the Episcopal Church. I think of Gabriella Carr, in *Life and Gabriella,* who, after the hard years had taught her some little wisdom, ran away in a panic from the most faithful and the most chivalrous of Southern gentlemen because she simply could not stand being married to his delusions.

I think of all these luckless women, I repeat, and of yet other women whom Ellen Glasgow has cre-

ated. And everywhere I find the problem: What is a woman to do before the toplofty notions entertained by the romantic male as concerns women? Is it best to conform to these notions, at the cost of a cankering dishonestness and of a futile pottering over ever-present small household tasks? or to ignore these notions, at the cost of a chilled and futile spinsterhood not over patiently endured by the casual charity of your nearer and less sympathetic relatives? or to rebel flatly against these insane notions by letting " human nature act like human nature," at the cost of acute discomfort and of ostracism and, in the end, of futility? Such is the problem which in its every solution involves futility. Such is the problem which, in our chivalrous Southland, Miss Glasgow has tacitly decreed to be the Tragedy of Everywoman, — for all that she has found it a tragedy of the mixed Jacobean school, wherein the comic scenes are as plentiful as the sad ones, and it is the latter which she has recorded with the larger gusto.

No, I shall not further pursue this quite dreadful theme. For to me in particular this is an embarrassing theme. Ellen Glasgow and I are the contemporaneous products of as near the same environment as was ever accorded to any pair of novelists. From that

environment she has builded her Queensborough and I my Lichfield; yet no towns have civic regulations more widely various. In our shared environment she waited a sad long time, as I, for recognition. She, waiting, wrote her salty reams about chivalry, in the while that within a stone's throw I was sprinkling sugar upon the same topic. Yes, the coincidence and the contrast are odd. Yet I find the outcome of it all, in the shape of our various books, to be troubling. The outcome permits me not the least doubt that this over-logical woman must decree me also to be " a romantic at heart," and must thus dismiss all my toplofty and age-old notions serenely. The outcome would even seem to suggest that the one or the other of us may be wrong. Yet I prefer to interpret it as proving only that never while life lasts can the two sexes ever quite understand each other. This is perhaps a rule which holds always and everywhere. Ellen Glasgow and I have but attested between us that it very rigidly holds in our chivalrous Southland.

Moreover, I observe that when, after some twenty-eight years of writing within the limits which befitted a Southern gentlewoman (with disquieting overtones), Miss Glasgow departed from that seem-

ingly discreet course by publishing, in *Barren Ground,* a quite unladylike book, she then attained for the first time a really appreciative and appreciable audience. I observe that when she more or less emulated the not unfamous old monk of Siberia, at the high cost of deriding the high tenets of our chivalrous Southland, in *The Romantic Comedians,* and yet again in *They Stooped to Folly,* then Ellen Glasgow became a major figure in American letters. As a loyal Southerner, I can but deduce with regret that the wages of sin may turn out to be art of an enduring quality.

VI

GOBLINS IN WINNEMAC

A Note as to Sinclair Lewis

"HE seemed prosperous, extremely married and unromantic. But Babbitt was again dreaming of the fairy child, a dream more romantic than scarlet pagodas by a silver sea. For years the fairy child had waited for him, in the darkness beyond mysterious groves."

VI — Goblins in Winnemac

I perceive some merit in Sinclair Lewis, even though I fail to detect it upon the grounds usually advanced. People who ought to know a great deal better will tell you that Sinclair Lewis has portrayed many aspects of our American life. In fact, when *Babbitt* and *Main Street* were but lately included in the library presented to President Herbert C. Hoover, it was upon the tactless ground, as stated by one of the selectors, that " the reading of them will help a man to understand the temperament of the American people." I put aside the ineluctable inference — as being an over-blunt if unintentional criticism of our first British President's conduct in office, — and I remark merely that I do not think the statement itself is true.

I shall come back to that. Meanwhile, in whatsoever milieu, Mr. Lewis throughout the deceased 'twenties dealt incessantly with one single problem: whether or not it is better to do that which seems expected? As long ago as in the autumn of 1920, in

Main Street, the question was raised whether Carol Kennicott should or should not conform to what Gopher Prairie expected? The question was given perhaps its most nearly classic form in *Babbitt,* wherein the protagonist fidgets before this problem, of conforming or of not conforming, in connection with well-nigh all departments of life as it is led in Zenith the Zip City. Then Mr. Lewis turned to the especial variant of the same problem as it concerns the scientist, in *Arrowsmith;* in *Elmer Gantry* he brought the minister of the gospel face to face with this problem; and finally, in 1929, he confronted Sam Dodsworth with the problem (already touched upon in *Mantrap*) of conforming or of not conforming to that which seemed expected in — of all avocations — the pursuit of pleasure.

Very much as Ellen Glasgow has been haunted perpetually by the question, What should a woman do before the idiocy of male notions? so has Sinclair Lewis, I think, been beset for at least ten years by the kindred problem, What should a man do before the idiotic notions of other men? In brief, do the inhabitants of Zenith and Monarch and Sparta and Banjo Crossing, or of any other community in Winnemac, pay the more dearly for living as self-

determining individuals or as conformists to their neighbors' communal follies?

Mr. Lewis does not ever answer that question outright: but he does very insistently compel his readers to cast about for an answer. Time and again Sinclair Lewis has exalted the bravery if not precisely the wisdom of individualism by the roundabout method of depicting the conformist. There is, he has discovered, a great deal of humbug and stupidity and viciousness going about masked as the correct thing to do in every walk of life as life speeds in Winnemac, the home of manly men and of womanly women and of other Regular Guys. And Mr. Lewis portrays with loving abhorrence superb monsters, now and then a bit suggestive of human beings, who make the very best (in an entirely utilitarian sense) of this humbug and of this stupidity and of this viciousness, to enhance their own moral standing and bank accounts.

I said, he portrays. Yet Sinclair Lewis is far too opulently gifted to have to plagiarize his manly men and his womanly women from the life about him. He has turned instead — compelled it may be by those freakish planets which ruled over the date of his birth, — to commemorate a more striking race.

I perhaps can best explain my meaning by reminding you that upon 7 February 1812 was born at Portsmouth, in England, the discoverer of that gnome-like United States of America which, when young Martin Chuzzlewit visited it in 1842, was inhabited by Colonel Diver (of the *Rowdy Journal*) and Mr. Jefferson Brick and Major Cyrus Choke and Mr. Lafayette Kettle and the Honorable Elijah Pogram, and by yet other of the most remarkable goblins in the country, — a discomfortable country that clung with untirable lungs "to the Palladium of rational Liberty," in government of the people by the people. All these, we know, are superb and somewhat sinister grotesques which were not, as we likewise know, in 1842 or at any other instant, the least bit "true to life," but which none the less in 1930 continue exuberantly to live. I would remind you also that just seventy-three years after the birth of Charles Dickens, upon 7 February 1885, was born at Sauk Center, in Minnesota, the portrayer of Almus Pickerbaugh and Vergil Gunch and Elmer Gantry and Chum Frink and scores of still other superb yet somewhat sinister grotesques. Their names alone, not altogether of this sunlit earth, but cacophonous and grating and darkly gnome-like,

betray the origin which their conduct confirms. These are most plainly the elvish grandchildren, upon the distaff side, of that unhuman race encountered by Martin Chuzzlewit, Jr., during his exile to an uncanny land not ever again visited, I believe, by any other tourist until Sinclair Lewis went a-wayfaring on faery seas and in 1920 discovered Winnemac.

I am far from suggesting that this shared birthday has made of Mr. Lewis our American Dickens. In fact, to describe any author whatsoever as " the American So-and-So " is the hall-mark of those whom an education beyond their mental means has but enabled to express their entire lack of ideas grammatically. Then, too, not even that kindred ever-present humorousness which flickers through the writings of both men, like incessant heat lightnings, should blind us to the fact that in fundamentals no writers differ more decisively.

In every book by Dickens the backbone of all is optimism and a fixed faith that by-and-by justice and candor will prevail. No reader of *Martin Chuzzlewit* believes for one paragraph that Martin and Mark Tapley may perhaps not win safely through the troll-haunted America to which they have been temporarily exiled. They are but taking part in a

very old form of fairy tale, in which a particular room may not be entered by the human hero, or a magic broom be touched, or a pomegranate be tasted, except at the cost of his eternal slavery in goblin land. The goblins, that is, will get you if you don't watch out. They will get you if you enter the room they suggest or eat the pomegranates they offer you in profusion. But the firm of Chuzzlewit & Tapley, as we well know, travel in the cause of conventional righteousness: it follows, in Dickens' philosophy, as indeed it usually follows in actual life, that the pair will in due course be provided with monetary competence and acceptable brides. They will escape, in fine, from the goblins — just as in all fairy tales the heroes lightly escape, by the simple process of not conforming to that which the goblins urge them to do, — and somewhere in the neighborhood of the Blue Dragon Inn, near Salisbury, they will enter into a future of generally unalloyed bliss wherein will figure no Major Cyrus Choke and no Honorable Elijah Pogram.

The doctrine of Mr. Lewis would seem to run quite the other way. In book after book he has presented one or another individualist at least as truly heroic as ever was young Martin Chuzzlewit, and

an individualist who, in opposing the solicitations of the elvish burghers of Winnemac, remains theoretically in the right, but who ends as a rule in material ruin and who ends always in defeat. I shall not labor this point, because Mr. Lewis himself does not make much of it. He does but indicate, by sketching lightly the career of a Frank Shallard or of a Max Gottleib, the truism that in Winnemac as elsewhere the opponent of any communal folly is in for a bad time of it. These adventurers find that the old recipe, of not conforming to that which the goblins urge them to do, is of no least avail to deliver them from the goblins of Winnemac. Instead, the Rev. Dr. Elmer Gantry and the Honorable Almus Pickerbaugh are with them to the very end, in some not unfriendly bewilderment as to why the poor mutt should have opposed the *mores* of Winnemac when he could so easily have made use of these fantasies to enhance his moral standing and his bank account.

This is a tragedy, I repeat, which Mr. Lewis does but indicate. His real interest turns otherwhither as though bewitched by the quaintness of the commonplace. It remains fascinated by the conformist and by the droll ways of his goblin flourish-

ing (wherein timidity turns to sound money and lies become limousines) at the cost of intellectual and spiritual ruin. The individualist is lost in a world made over-safe for democracy; and the conformist becomes not worth saving. That is the doctrine which informs all the derisive apologues Sinclair Lewis has fetched out of Winnemac. That is, in one sense, the powder which speeds his every shot at our polity. In another sense it is the powder disguised in the succulent jam of his caricatures.

So it has been throughout the ten years since Mr. Lewis first toyed with his pet problem in Gopher Prairie. He then told us, with a mendacity which time and his later books have coöperated to expose, that Gopher Prairie was a small town in Minnesota. We all know now that Gopher Prairie — like Zenith and Monarch and Sparta and Banjo Crossing, and like every other place that Mr. Lewis has written about since 1920, — is a portion of the grotesque and yet always rather sinister, strange goblin land of Winnemac.

I delight in Winnemac and in all its citizenry: yet it is, as I have suggested, with very much the same pleasure I derive from Dickens. That pleasure is, to the one side, somewhat the pleasure I get from

the " Mr. and Mrs." cartoons in the Sunday paper and from Amos and Andy over the radio, and (to the other side) from a great deal of Molière and Swift and Aristophanes and Lucian, — the pleasure, that is, of seeing a minim of reality exaggerated into Brobdingnagian incredibility. There is apparent in each that single grain of truth which has budded, through more or less skilled and patient gardening, into this gaudy efflorescence of the impossible. The seed explains the flowering: but it is the flowering which counts, and which charms. So when I hear Sinclair Lewis classed as a " realist," it is with something of the same wonderment in which I have heard that he lives, along with Messrs. Dreiser and Cabell and Anderson, in a never lifting atmosphere of despair and frustration. Each of these critical clichés has very often tempted me, I admit, toward just that quiet and ambiguous giving-out of a sedate " Well, well, we know," or of an " If we but list to speak," which the one Prince of Denmark to attain any international fame so justly reprobates.

All that, though, is extraneous, in addition to being only a matter of faith. If you can believe in the " realism " of Sinclair Lewis it will give you a great deal more of comfort than does any other " real-

ism." For my part, I can but protest that I very heartily enjoy his books without any more believing in Almus Pickerbaugh and Elmer Gantry and the other hobgoblins as persons whom one may hope to encounter in our imperfect world than I can believe (after any such literal fashion) in Joe and Vi, or in Jefferson Brick and Colonel Diver, or, for that matter, in Bottom and Caliban.

Meanwhile if, as one hears freely nowadays, Sinclair Lewis is obsolescent, and his books are doomed, the trouble is not merely that the United States is due to lose one of its most interesting commonwealths, in the State of Winnemac. For one really wonders what in the world is to be done about George Follansbee Babbitt? Just eight years ago this Babbitt emigrated from 401 pages of a novel into the racial consciousness of mankind. He is one of those satisfying large symbols which at long intervals some author hits upon, and which promptly take on a life that is not confined to the books wherein they first figured. Babbitt is in train, I think, to become one of those myths which rove forever through the irrational Marches of Antan, and about which writers not yet born will weave their own pet stories as inevitably as writers will continue to concern

themselves with Faust and Don Juan and the Brown God Pan.

None of us "new humanists" may kill Babbitt. Babbitt thrives not merely through the art of selling houses for more than the people of Zenith can afford to pay for them. He graces yet other sound business enterprises everywhere: his voice is heard in our legislative assemblies, nor is it silent in Wall Street: his matured opinions upon political matters have been known to issue even from the White House. He writes the most of our books: he reviews all of them. He shapes each law by which our lives are governed, and he instructs us too how to evade these laws: not even in death may we look to escape from Babbitt, for then to the one side of us shall sit Babbitt the physician and to the other side Babbitt the clergyman, each pottering over our last needs in that dark hour. The natural grief of our heirs and assigns he will forthwith capitalize in the form of a fat overcharge for our coffins: and about a year later, when once the grave has settled down cosily, then Babbitt will be engraving our tombstones with the most exalted sentiments of his own smug selecting. Babbitt cannot ever perish so long as all good Americans cling (in Colonel Diver's fine phrase)

to the Palladium, in government of the people by the people, and the perturbed neighbors cling in self-protection to their sense of humor. There is something of Babbitt in every one of us.

Moreover, this Babbitt is no parvenu born only eight years ago. He had existed since time's youth; and Mr. Lewis did but serve as his literary sponsor in an oddly belated christening. George Follansbee Babbitt, as Walter Pater has phrased it, is older than the rocks he quarries into building material. For Babbitt, also, has trafficked for strange webs with Eastern merchants. His was the presence which rose so strangely beside the waters to further the commercial supremacy of Tyre, and Carthage, and Liverpool. Under the alias of Marco Polo, as was lately shown us, he has established satisfactory business relations with the Khan of Cathay; and as Cristoforo Colombo, he has looked for a paying traffic route into India. He has gone well-greaved against Troy, at the behest of the Greek draft laws; he has shouted "Crucify him!" in Jerusalem; he has burned Jews in Seville, and he has hanged witches in Salem, as conscientiously as he fetched back from his unwillingly attended Crusades only the syphilis. And all this, to that level head upon which all the

ends of the world are come, all this has been to Babbitt, not quite as the sound of liars and brutes, but merely that which seemed expected of him, or of any other level-headed Regular Guy, in his then present circumstances.

VII

PROTÉGÉS OF THE CENSOR

A Note as to Various Writers

"WHICH said book is so obscene, lewd, lascivious and indecent that a minute description of the same would be offensive to the Court and improper to be placed upon the records thereof. Wherefore a fuller description of the same is not set forth."

VII — Protégés of the Censor

I perceive some merit in Theodore Dreiser. Yet it is his luck which just now the more irresistibly woos my fancy — that irrational bit of luck which he has shared with others among the deciduous writers of the 'twenties. I mean, that more than once Mr. Dreiser has attracted the highly remunerative disfavor of those patrolmen of our literary morals who have also intermeddled at odd times with the work of Sherwood Anderson.

Now here of course one applauds these capricious offspring of Torquemada by Libitina, since they ordinarily hunt the obscene, on a fair salary, in more modest altitudes. That Messrs. Dreiser and Anderson, after winning the respectful consideration of all persons interested in *belles lettres,* should have attained the further honor of being censored by Mr. John S. Sumner, and banned by the Watch and Ward Society, appeared a commendable enough outcome, since Theodore Dreiser and Sherwood Anderson happened to be honest and weighty writers.

Their books seemed very well to deserve this additional prestige, which in but too many instances had been over carelessly bestowed upon novels only a little above the homage of a Pulitzer Prize committee.

For what, after all, is the last upshot of such antics as are enacted now and then in most American cities by the unrestrained zealots of decorum, and nearly every week in Boston? The final event of all censorial indiscretions is, as I was reading but a day or two ago, " that the prohibited book or work of art gains an adventitious value. More often than not, the forbidden thing has no artistic merit. The censor, however, assures it wide circulation and success. A case in point is such unmitigated rubbish as Mr. James Branch Cabbel's *Jurgen,* which has been hailed as a masterpiece, as the essence of wit, and as the last word in wisdom. It is none of these things, but the censor prejudiced the minds of the critics to an absurd extent."

That is not the exact illustrative example, nor the precise spelling, which I of my own accord would have chosen. Yet these harsh words do bear upon the most important of the numerous points involved in the innumerous exercises of censorship. That point, I think, is that the censor does not often en-

dow such persons as Messrs. Dreiser and Anderson with the esteem of the general reading public. He but too frequently attacks books which really ought to be suppressed; he succeeds only in advertising his targets far and wide; and all literatures thus become overburdened with worthless writings which have obtained unfairly, through a brief season of being censored, the repute and the perennially alluring fame of being " indecent."

For in certain biological functions (to refer to which in print as yet remains in America technically " indecent ") all mankind are very vitally interested. There is not any known theme which more instantly engages the profound and cordial interest of civilised persons, if but because all vigorous and healthy people here derive from " indecency," alike in literature and in practice, a normal and entirely wholesome delight. I have heard that they even make jokes about it.

Yet here of course are concerned not merely the vigorous and healthy, and not only such persons as are more or less civilised. The immature are concerned too — I mean, the mentally immature, — inasmuch as their awed interest in the callisthenics of amour is both more morbid and more deep. I have

elsewhere regretted the allied facts that to the immature-minded any reference to sexual matters is impressive far beyond its rational weight; and that, given a book in which there is one lonely hint of the technically "indecent," it is that single passage which the mentally immature, howsoever staid and gray, will remember, whether with sniggers or with indignation, long after the rest of the book is forgotten. Such are they who recall merely that *An American Tragedy* dealt with a seduction, and that in *Many Marriages* the man took off all his clothes in the presence of his grown-up daughter.

With the human race, whether for good or ill, thus constituted, whensoever a book is fleetingly censored for being (as runs the formula of Mr. Sumner's accolade) "obscene and lewd and lascivious and indecent," then the response of all mankind to any tidings of that fact becomes virtually unanimous. The tabooed matter is forthwith approached with an interest so lively and so very vividly hopeful that it is now and then well able to survive the disappointment of finding the assaulted author a bit unremuneratively chaste reading. Besides, one never knows what the next page or two may produce. So one reads on.

Thus does it follow that those books which this or the other censor has officially certified to be indecent, and at least sixty per cent impure, tend to find these ever-hopeful readers year after year; and thus with depressing regularity do these writings tend to become books which have survived the date of their first publication long enough to be loosely describable as " classics." Though who indeed buys, one very often wonders, those high-priced samples of so unexhilarating and so timid pseudo-erotica which the New York *Times* and the *Herald Tribune* advertise every Sunday in their literary sections, upon a special page well toward the back as though segregated in a sort of typographic Ghetto? It seems plain enough that, since they continue to be reprinted, these " rare and limited editions " of formerly censored books must find purchasers somewhere. And one forlornly suspects that these gulled purchasers may often attempt to misapply the fine art of reading to the wide-margined and rag-paper pages of all this guaranteed " unexpurgated " tediousness.

That possibility the censor alone has brought about through meddling at one time or another with books which ought rigorously to have been ignored. I incline to think, for example, that no

mortal being (with but a single life-time at his disposal) would ever try to read through one of these " privately printed " and permanently " reduced " sets of Burton's *Arabian Nights* except upon strong moral dissuasion. Barring the censor's aid, *La Fille aux Yeux d'or* and *Les Chansons de Bilitis* might well have remained in their not particularly original French, instead of being thus translated into gilded traps for the pornoscopic. The censor, and none other, in brief, has thus prompted a persistent dishonoring of the Sabbath day with the offence known as *suggestio falsi.*

Yet this is very far from being all of the censor's baleful work. I shall now quote from the one author whose complete works I have read several times with that close attention which is demanded by proof sheets. He tells me that " it is quite dreadful to consider with what sad and futile perseverance such at one time censored matter as the sloppy and soporific catalogues of Rabelais, the pale inanities of the *Heptameron* and the unendurably dull botcheries of Boccaccio — or, for that matter, of Fielding and of Smollett — have been toiled through by misguided millions in quest of these authors' rumored indecency. It is even more dreadful, for the ears of

the fairly honest, to hear anyone of these readers protest, as they all do invariably, that he reads not for the story's sake, but because of the delicate art and the sparkling wit with which the story is told. Besides, he does get in the way of indecency so very little for his trouble."

I can so rarely approve of any writing done by the author just cited that it is a frank pleasure to endorse these sayings. For that, in brief, does seem to me the ultimate main trouble with all forms of censorship in literary matters. The Watch and Ward Society, for example, far too often attacks a book which ought to be suppressed (upon rational rather than moral grounds) and it thus labors to afflict posterity with an infinite deal of time-wasting, in that censorship almost always converts the attacked book, irrespective of its worth or unworth, into an established if minor classic. To do that is of course a high-handed tyrannizing over the unborn, who must read these classics. Moreover, for any Bostonians to do that appears peculiarly superfluous, inasmuch as American literature is already most prodigally overstocked with classics emanating from Massachusetts which are devoid of all grace and merit.

Now and then, though, the affair displays a side very much more winsome. For now and then, as in the cases of Messrs. Dreiser and Anderson, the censor advertises a performance which merits assistance. Just now and then he averts from his daily fodder of the childishly salacious, and he gives over his innocent playing with rubber toys and picture post cards, so that he may cast the lime-light of moral reprobation upon a bit of sincere and talented writing. He then finds readers for his protégé where unaided merit could find none. He furthermore displays then, in his every act and speech, such fathomless asininity as provokes our instant championship for anyone whom he asperses. He is then entitled to our fervent applause.

I for one applaud even in the teeth of much which I myself have written at odd times. For here, I am afraid, in the novels of Sherwood Anderson and of Theodore Dreiser, is " realism " reasonably naked and unabashed; and my lack of love for " realism " has been expressed in several thousand pages. Yet here also is honesty; here is frankness; here is human tolerance: and these three one respects perforce. When a helping hand toward public applause is proffered to these three by the prude's dishonesty

and by that wincing intolerance of all frankness which (through motives howsoever genuine) the censor embodies, then the considerate cannot but be delighted.

I confess to regarding with somewhat different emotions that aid which Mr. Sumner extended to the aforementioned unmitigated rubbish of Mr. Cabell. Yet of this particular writer's work I may not pretend to be an unbiased judge. I admit that I read the books of James Branch Cabell without enjoyment. It is a large solace to my declining years, to look affably upon the definitive edition of this Cabell's books, and to reflect that I am under no further need to toil through any line therein.

As a " stylist " he has, they tell me, his finicking pretensions. But I for one have rarely read a sentence by Mr. Cabell — and never in any case an entire paragraph — without noting frettedly how much it could be improved by changes which at once suggest themselves as obvious. I can read no book by him without wanting to rewrite it. I detect in his prose more slips and more bungled opportunities than I find in the prose of any other writer living or dead.

Moreover, it seems to me he has carried logic, in

somewhat the manner of his own Florian de Puysange, to illogical extremes. The Biography of the life of Manuel is now finished in its eighteen volumes. The pattern, should you care to look for it, looms plain enough, and, as I have admitted, it has logic: the Biography becomes in truth a coherent epic, with its prologue and epilogue and its explanatory notes, an epic in which the protagonist ranges through seven centuries. The drawback is that the pattern appears a bit too logical: this scheme of three possible attitudes toward human life, with each attitude regarded in four aspects, tends over strongly to suggest an exercise in arithmetic rather than in æsthetics. The further drawback is that, as with all other epics, nobody has the needful patience to read the thing in its benumbing entirety. Then too Mr. Cabell goes beyond all anterior offenders. To demand of your readers that they labor through no modest Iliad-length of some 16,000 hexameters, but through eighteen extensive volumes, in order to find out just what the writer may be driving at, is to ignore a great deal more widely than did Homer's blindness the firm limits of human nature. It would also seem to imply that Mr. Cabell takes his own work rather more seriously than anyone else

is likely to do, now that the censor no longer favors him with public abhorrence.

And yet for that naïve self-centeredness I can perceive some excuse. When a man devotes his life to any one task it were but an additional folly for him to pretend that he is not taking that task seriously. I can even admire — if only in the word's pale academic sense — the not lowly point of view which the Biography as a whole affects. For before Horvendile-Cabell pass the twenty-three generations endlessly performing that comedy which, as it is enacted between the birth and death of romanticizing man, does not ever vary in essentials. Mr. Cabell affects to regard these twenty-three repetitive generations with that aloof humorousness and personal unconcern such as a fairly modest God must necessarily extend to his own handiwork.

But the drawback is that this personal unconcern proves highly contagious to the reader. The drawback is that from this divine point of view (to which the reader also has been lugged) the trooping manikins appear of too marked unimportance. We are so made that we can sympathize with an individual but not with a whole nation, — or not at least so long as we continue to pay taxes upon our former

sympathy with brave little Belgium. The drawback, in brief, is that Mr. Cabell's tiring readers begin by-and-by to think restively about the first of all censors. He endured, you remember, ten generations. When the eleventh began, He sent the Deluge.

VIII
ABOUT ONE AND ANOTHER
A Note as to Joseph Hergesheimer

"WHEN I wrote about the pedlars of pewter sleeping at the edges of cornfields, under the harvest moon, I envied them. It was strange how, with my very considerable present success, I lingered over the precarious wanderings of such penniless vagabonds a century or more ago."

VIII—About one and another

I perceive some merit in Joseph Hergesheimer. And to do that nowadays is of course a bit unusual. It becomes an axiom that, as a novelist, Joseph Hergesheimer has been debauched by avocations so remote from literature as the writing of scenarios for the moving pictures and short stories for the *Saturday Evening Post.* Now that the 'twenties end, you may hear anywhere (alike from the omniscient young, as yet in the larval stage of contributing book reviews to the provincial press, and from those full-fledged literati whose authority rests upon quotidian columns about nothing in particular) that after a most promising début Mr. Hergesheimer succumbed to greed. The elegy then narrates how Mr. Hergesheimer turned to the manufacture of such trumpery reading-matter as commanded the best market prices, and it tells also how in gilded Hollywood he ducked before Rimmon the remunerative knee. Joseph Hergesheimer ranks as a well-nigh classic instance of the artist gone wrong.

That notion appears to me to be nonsense. I admit of course that the later work of Joseph Hergesheimer has suffered, unavoidably, by comparison with his earlier work. It has suffered through a reason which I have elsewhere indicated. By the time any fairly gifted and painstaking writer has captured his fit clientèle, and has formed his manner, that manner has perforce become to that clientèle familiar. That manner may have laboriously acquired, and it may carefully retain, all imaginable graces save one grace; it cannot any longer exert the arresting charm of seeming new: and newness is, in any book fresh from the printing press, the sole virtue which can retentively beguile the reader's interest and evoke his applause. So the clientèle, unavoidably, grumbles.

We who read books for diversion do ask, in fine, of a new book that it contain something new. One has but to consider the reception accorded *The Woman of Andros* and the more recent of Dr. John Erskine's books to perceive we demand that each novel shall be more or less of a novelty. Lacking novelty, we lack the due reward of our thoughtfulness in remembering the name of the book and of our civility when we asked for it at the public li-

brary. We feel that we have been put to thankless exertions by the man's continued failure to be somebody else; and, with the high-handed fretfulness of old customers, we decide to trade elsewhere.

Yet that is very far from being all, as goes the hurt to the author's prospering. It remains at worst the happy privilege of every patron of a public library to return his books unread. We luckless reviewers, though, who depend upon books not for pastime but for pocket money, and who so have to plough through several pages of the damned thing willy-nilly — we who are only human under howsoever fine a coat of humanism — we in particular cannot but resent this lack of newness as a sort of personal affront. It is the author we feel (with entire justice) who is making our hard enough task even more difficult through these over-trite tricks of mannerism. It is the author who has compelled us to sit in at this Monday's meal of remnants: and the provoked acerbity colors all which we write concerning him, if we write honestly.

It is thus in no way surprising that, after fifteen years of public handling by those fools and failures who for our sins compose the ruling majority of mankind, Mr. Hergesheimer's repute as a caterer of

good reading-matter, in common with the repute of Messrs. Dreiser and Anderson and Cabell and Lewis, should have wilted perceptibly. The trouble is not so much, I think, that all these gentry are nowadays providing inferior fare as that the menu is foreknown. They have passed, that is, from lavish fields of entertainment *à la carte* to the faintly stale stability of the *table d'hôte*. Yet in the main this notion (as it customarily figures in the colloquial) that "Hergesheimer has gone off terribly" rests, I am sure, upon the fact that, for every practical end, there are two Hergesheimers.

You have but to consider *The Three Black Pennys, Java Head, The Bright Shawl, Balisand,* and yet other of their author's stories about an America which has perished. Since as to these particular books I have already loosed my pæans, in *Straws and Prayer-Books,* I have here not any present need to re-affirm my strong and my enduring delight in these fiery-hearted romances.

I affirm, instead, that you have but to weigh these romances against *Cytherea* and *Tampico* and *The Party Dress,* to perceive two entirely different writers are here involved. The last-named books are adroitly done; they are vivid; they are ingenious;

they are excellent pastime: they have every quality which one may rationally require in, let us say, a top-notch grade of reading-matter. But in the earlier-named books you encounter that which is not rational: you encounter, and you yield to, magic. You encounter a difference as wide, I am tempted to declare, as that which exists between the Alexandre Dumas who wrote *Olympe de Clèves* and the Alexandre Dumas who wrote *La Dame aux Camélias*. You encounter, in short, the two Hergesheimers.

Why there should be these two Hergesheimers I shall not undertake to say, for the sufficing reason that I do not know. I observe, though, that the career of the late Maurice Hewlett offers an interestingly exact parallel. There were two Hewletts also, of whom the one wrote *Mainwaring* and *Love and Lucy* and *The Little Iliad* and yet three other volumes of similar triviality about one John Senhouse. When Maurice Hewlett dealt with contemporary life he advanced delicately between his deep-rooted sense of form and his glowing vocabulary, without ever touching either. This Hewlett, in brief, wrote balderdash mincingly, and was one of the over many disciples who have betrayed George Meredith.

But there was that other Maurice Hewlett who contrived *Richard Yea-and-Nay* and *The Queen's Quair* and yet other strong necromancies. When Hewlett turned toward the past his art was sure: the dead obeyed it and came out of dustiness. They approached us through a soft golden twilight which made their seeming more heroic than is the seeming of human men and women.

For at the call of this Maurice Hewlett, Angevin Richard came, as a leopard rises, from the carved tomb at Fontevraud, and looked warily upon us with cold, considering, bright eyes. This very tall and high-colored young man then said to us sullenly, " Thus it was with my Jehane of the Fair Girdle and the Old Man of Musse." When Richard had told his *gestes,* the earth stirred in Henry the Seventh's chapel at Westminster. A chestnut-haired slim girl smiled at us, meditatively, with over-thin red lips. Her playthings lay everywhere about her, scattered at the small velvet-shod feet—dead Darnley and Rizzio and Chastelard and Bothwell and John Gordon and yet other murdered men in bright clothing. She regarded us with a sleepy and a side-long glance, saying, " Thus it was with all these that loved me, and that died because of their love for Queen Mary."

Then Messire Prosper le Gai came fully armed, in black chain mail, and girt with a red baldric which displayed his device of a hooded falcon worked handsomely in gold threads. " Thus it was," he said to us, " in Morgraunt." The great Brazenhead, scarred and ragged and very hairy, shouted, " By Cock, but thus it was, you flea-pastures, in Milan and in Burgundy! " And a noble host of yet other strangely colored and heroic beings whom this Hewlett's necromancy had evoked from the time-ruined graves of Spain and Italy and Iceland, and of that yet fairer kingdom of Jadis, trooped mightily about us in a golden twilight, saying, " Thus it was in the old days."

Now, as was pointed out some fifteen years ago, fiction in its highest reaches has always dealt with long past or imaginary eras. By " fiction " I mean, of course, all forms of fiction, from Homer and the Pentateuch even down to the current choice of the Book of the Month Club. And I prefer to concede this fact merely as a fact which consideration reveals without explaining, although two or three explanations rear dubious heads. In any case (to my finding) the writer's imagination when it handles the contemporary cannot be so profoundly stirred as

when it touches that past which men have invented for their ancestors. He is compelled, by the lubberly intrusion of common-sense, to observe that the life going on about him is prevailingly a blind and timid and generally rodent-like business; and that in trying to make valid art of it he is attempting to make a mountain out of a mole-hill.

When he reports, for example, in what circumstances Mr. Lee Randon of Eastlake, Pa., eloped with Mrs. William Loyd Grove of East Sixty-fifth Street, New York City, perhaps the intelligent artist cannot quite make a book of it without some faint underlying sense of raising an inordinate pother. Mrs. Grove died, and Mrs. Randon no doubt entered suit for divorce, and there was a paragraph in the paper. Yet after all (it may be asked of him chillily, by that interior critic who maintains every sincere artist in salutary self-dissatisfaction), after all, why should anybody devote some 80,000 words to these happenings in a world wherein elopements and divorce suits and most newspapers are as common as congressmen?

But in dealing with the past the affair speeds otherwise. When Paris eloped with Helen there were no proceedings in the Law and Equity Court of

Sparta. At Aulis marshalled a thousand and thirteen of the Greek ships. The notoriously well greaved Achaeans, in number even as are the flowers and the fruits in their seasons, then sat down upon the benches of these ships, and they smote the gray sea water with their oars of fir-wood. Thereafter, even as when this or that does so and so, and the results follow, in pretty much any Homeric simile, even thus did the hollow ships advance their vermilion prows; and the long warring against Troy began to provide us with themes of appropriate dignity and deep color. "For thus it was," says Homer,—and "Even thus it was," avow all the large nation of poets, who have berhythmed so variously one or another result of Queen Helen's elopement,—"thus it was in the old days."

Nor does it matter should reflection assure anybody that to every likelihood things did not happen, in a semi-barbarous Asia Minor, exactly as the narrator declares. It does not even matter if, as some say, Queen Helen never did elope with Paris. That is a point concerning which we may pardonably decline all scholastic advice, such as the learned tender in footnotes, to compare Philostratus *Vit. Apollon.* IV, 16, with J. Tzetzes, *Antehomerica,* 147 *sqq.*

For the real point is that, in the absence of disproof, we can play that things happened as we prefer. We may introduce into the tale of Troy whatsoever variations most please our fancy. It follows that, in dealing with this, the most significant of all elopements, even if it never took place, the creative artist works untrammeled, and the interior critic smiles.

Well, and so too has Mr. Hergesheimer profited very often by our half belief that once upon a time human affairs had more of dignity and of fire and of loveliness than is today apparent anywhere. He has needed but to regard that which was beautiful and is now lost, to convert the Hergesheimer who is an accomplished craftsman into the Hergesheimer who works magic. He proved that only the other day when he wrote *Quiet Cities*. He abandoned the distressing iniquities of the élite. He turned again toward the past, and his art was sure. The dead obeyed it. They came out of dustiness, with heroic seemings. Then he wrote *The Party Dress,*—and with this sample of, let us say, top-notch craftsmanship Mr. Hergesheimer ended his labors during the 'twenties.

Meanwhile he has paid the price of his craftsmanship. He has paid it repeatedly, through the reviews

accorded his books in many literary sections and in those few of our weekly journals which are not comic by pre-meditation. The trouble here, I suspect, is that this craftsmanship has been remunerative a bit too volubly. Many reviewers approach a little awkwardly to this Joseph Hergesheimer who appears somewhat over decorated with the unarguable epaulets and spangles of success. Legal propriety demands that the judge's seat should be elevated, at the very least, as high as the dock. It is a part of the game that we reviewers should temporarily assume ourselves to be in every way as important and as well worth listening to as is the author whom we are about to put in his proper place. One perceives that in passing judgment upon Joseph Hergesheimer (who time and again has so tactlessly shown his superiority to any known critical writer alike as a flower of fashion and as an associate of multi-millionaires and of the very best known moving picture stars), the implausibility of this assumption must become quite irritating, to any fair-minded reviewer. The provoked acerbity, whether he wills this outcome or not, must color all that he writes concerning Mr. Hergesheimer. And, God knows, it does.

I am afraid that human nature, since it is alike the offspring and the begetter of all failure, cannot ever deal in utter justice with the flamboyantly successful. Involuntarily one's teeth show. I notice some glinting of the incisors even in what I myself write about Mr. Hergesheimer. It is but human here to feel that valid art is not thus intimately rewarded with knowledge as to the preferred drinks and lingerie of exalted circles which we also contemplate with something of the late Ouida's fascinated horror. It is but human for envy here to deduce, through a sneered *non sequitur,* that therefore Mr. Hergesheimer has created no valid art.

That notion, I repeat, appears to me to be nonsense. Upon the fingers of reflection I can tick off half a dozen wholly excellent volumes by Joseph Hergesheimer; and I regard his art, when at its handsomest, as unparalleled in American letters.

Even so, I do not presume to argue with the embattled young who babble vaguely about Mr. Hergesheimer's "artiness." I turn instead toward old acquaintances. A great long way beyond critical dicta, lean Howat Penny travels through the autumn woods: at his side is a peculiarly modish person, in bottle green, with her face hid by a linen

riding mask. He is saying, "This is stronger than anything else which will ever touch me." Ludowicka does not answer him with words. They pass silently into a small stone house, and with the frankness of young animals they unite among the piled-up, musty-smelling bales of tanned hides. A Manchu woman, in darkly shimmering silk robes sprinkled with small blue and orange butterflies, walks slowly under green elm trees toward a harbor wherein a brig is unloading its cargo of ivory: the writhing clay-colored face of Edward Dunsack watches her with demented eyes. In a helterskelter dressing-room, heaped with a bright confusion of fans and stilettos and carnival masks, La Clavel draws hastily around her shoulders a vivid gray-green shawl embroidered with enormous magenta peonies. Charles Abbott faces her, in the correct evening clothes of 1840, and expresses in halting words a perturbation of no particular date. A contentedly married husband sits alone, over the brandy decanter, among the time-darkened portraits of the Bales of Balisand: every aspect of his life is favorable; no mortal need stays unsatisfied: but a tender and fragile ghost provokes immortal longings, incessantly, turning all loveliness into a slow and cor-

rosive poison, in the while that gray Richard Bale remembers that which was beautiful and is now lost.

I regard these old acquaintances, I say: and for an instant, before returning to the love affair or the duel just then in hand, they regard me also. They know not of the country club, they carry no pocket flask encrusted with rare gems, they do not sit upon one another's knees in luxuriously equipped limousines, nor do they mingle in any other scandalous goings-on of the idle rich. Instead, these are superior beings, a whit larger than life. They posture, to my elated heart's content, in a soft golden twilight such as one Hewlett once evoked. They speak to me with heroic voices, saying, " Thus it was in the old days."

IX

DREAMS ON COSMOGONY

A Note as to H. L. Mencken

"OF all the sentimental errors which reign and rage in this incomparable republic, the worst, I often suspect, is that which confuses the function of criticism, whether æsthetic, political or social, with the function of reform."

IX — Dreams on Cosmogony

I perceive some merit in H. L. Mencken. Though, indeed, one inclines nowadays to regard H. L. Mencken somewhat less as a human being than as a force — as an inestimable and a yet unchristened force. I would rank it somewhere between electricity and influenza. For nowadays, with all the 'twenties transmitted from the morning paper into history, one observes that Mr. Mencken's worth as a writer becomes of increasing unimportance.

He bids fair, by-and-by, to be thought of as a writer only in some such limited sense as that in which Frederick the Great or Dr. Samuel Johnson or the late Dr. Woodrow Wilson may be thought of as a writer. All four have written a great deal; the fact is, in each career, a minor feature.

Thus, the essential fact about the untiring scribbler of Sans Souci is not that he wrote, and even most tyrannically permitted to be published, his thirty volumes, quarto, but that he made a world power of

Prussia, to the world's subsequent wide regret. The important feature of Dr. Johnson's long literary czarship was neither *Rasselas* nor *Irene,* but a book composed by a Mr. Boswell of Auchinleck. And, of course, well-nigh everybody has quite forgotten that Woodrow Wilson ever wrote history, because of everybody's stupefaction over the way that he bungled it. In somewhat the same manner, I suspect, will the writings of H. L. Mencken be submerged, by-and-by, in wholly unauctorial glories. I do not prophesy as to his precise ranking in the encyclopedias of the future; I am merely certain that, whether for good or ill, his claim upon posterity's regard is valid. Mencken is one of the very few indisputably great men now living. He is a force which endures and which will endure for a long while. He is that force which has reshaped all the present world of American letters, the force from which, more prevalently than from any other origin, has sprung the cosmogony of that limited but not unimportant world.

He is an inestimable force, I said; and, I said also, a force somewhere between electricity and influenza. For electricity brings power and speed. It begets a clear, if not always a genial, lighting of dark places.

It does not, perhaps, build; but it devastates readily. It is brisk; whatsoever else it may lack, it is never lacking in animation. It retains always the power to shock.

Just such a force came out of Baltimore, some fifteen years ago, into the then peaceful and wholly barren field of American letters. Just such a force, I submit, has convulsed and changed that field throughout — a field which it still dominates. Not everybody, to be sure, enjoyed the invasion; many of us are made uneasy by thunder storms; but without these thunder storms the field might well have remained barren.

As matters stand, the field has not remained barren. A copious new crop of writers has burgeoned into public esteem. Of the more important among them I have spoken. They have differed in many ways, immeasurably: they have had this in common, that each of them has won to his or her first actual success immediately after his or her latest novel had been formally endorsed by H. L. Mencken of Baltimore. Whether that fact attests his gifts as a critic or as an advertising agency, I do not know: I do know that it justifies my earlier saying as to an entire small world's cosmogony.

To the other side of my analogue you may note that, for the more immediately concerned, influenza is the most agreeable of house guests. To have influenza is, to my not inconsiderable experience, pleasant. Between aspirin and whisky, the patient is kept in a comfortable glow, wherein a recumbently regarded universe seems droll, and no obligations nor calamities appear imminent nor of real importance. It is only the convalescence which costs — that damnable and that so long-drawn-out aftermath of post-influenzal depression, wherein all is a vague paining, and worthlessness seems omnipresent. The superb glow of Mencken also has had its sad aftermath, in the form of very many disciples whom one can but describe as the debunkers, the Menckenoids.

These contribute, as the world knows, to the *American Mercury;* and I can bethink me of no more misleading publication. Here is emphatically "a one man magazine." Mr. Mencken alone and unaided has passed on and accepted every line of its contents. And if, during the six strifeful years of the *American Mercury's* existence, any single feature of our contemporary life has stayed unassaulted as a begrimed humbug, it is but that the *American Mer-*

cury has not yet got around to this feature. To every side, in omnipresent worthlessness, is " exposed " the fraudulent and the tawdry and the nauseating. Whether our lawyers, our physicians, or our statesmen, are the more inanely corrupt remains an open question merely because our rev. clergy have overwhelming claims. " Americana " brings forth its monthly teeming yield of lush imbecilities culled from the American press. These States are but a badly run idiot asylum, which lacks efficient wardens and the proper sanitary arrangements. You would really imagine that Mr. Mencken, who has approved all these jeremiads, found the world to be an unsatisfactory place.

Then too these soured epigoni have made their turgid, soiled and flippant books, any candid consideration of which is forbidden by charity. It is far kindlier to estimate the Menckenoids as a part of the stiffish price we have paid, not at all unthriftily, for the benefits which were to be got from Mr. Mencken, and from him alone. So I would here dwell only upon the fact that Mr. Mencken's gravest literary offences have been his admirers. All through the 'twenties he demoralized the village press and most college magazines with disciples who had taken his

notions quite seriously. That is an error which Mr. Mencken himself has always avoided.

He has avoided any such naïveté with an artfulness and a shrewd humor and a very vast commonsense which now for fifteen years have made the man as immeasurably inimitable as he is entertaining. Indeed, I suspect the real secret of that never-flagging entertainingness to be the fact that the writer also has been entertained, and has at no moment been obsessed, by the notions with which he is playing. They may or they may not be true. Who knows? — well, not the right thinkers, in any case, nor the old maids, male and female. Meanwhile Mr. H. L. Mencken himself does know, at least, that these droll notions are amusing to play with. And meanwhile also his pleasure and his gusto prove to the reader as titillating as electricity and as infectious as influenza.

So it has been for many years, all through the aptly christened series of *Prejudices*. Those of the "new humanism" who are just now engaged in the awkward task of ignoring H. L. Mencken at the top of their voices will tell you that the entertainment has not widely varied. They zealously forget, of course, such astoundingly dissimilar offshoots as

Heliogabalus and *The American Language* and *Ventures into Verse*. But to my mind the far more important point is that the entertainment has never flagged. Mr. Mencken puts forth with the vigor of a perpetual April.

Even his very latest book, *Treatise on the Gods,* as completed in 1929, is most excellent Mencken. In many ways, indeed, this shrewd and robustious volume epitomizes all Mencken handsomely. He has graduated *cum laude* from the 'twenties with this long thesis upon religion — upon all religion from its barbarous dim origins, in the half-forgotten cosmogonies of Jahveh, and of Quat, and of Ra, and of Marduk, and of Yetl, and of still other Demiurges, down to the very latest gambols of religion in, so to speak, our current gospel mills.

Now, as a professed churchman, with some real faith and with a great many duplex envelopes for 1930 still left to show for it, I may well deplore the manner in which this theme is approached by Mr. Mencken. His approach is the approach favored always by the zealous infidel, and very often, as in this case, by the convinced agnostic; it is the same approach which has caused so much of the wit of Voltaire to appear trivial in its dusty irrelevance:

for Mr. Mencken also approaches religion rationally. To me, I admit, that seems futile, since if religion be founded upon any truth whatsoever, that truth is self-confessedly not amenable to human reason; and the mere rationalist in his approach is thus foredoomed to find nothing. Or perhaps I might better put it that the rationalist, when he applies his common-sense to religion, reminds me somewhat of a man attempting to measure distances with a thermometer; his measuring instrument is an excellent measurer in its own way, and in its proper field, but he happens to be misapplying it.

This much of protest I owe to my faith. I owe with equal fairness to Mr. Mencken the statement that I enjoyed his *Treatise on the Gods* tremendously. If in his attempts to dispose of religion my misguided friend has never found religion, nor even apprehended its nature, he has missed few of its parasites: and with every one of them he has diverted himself, and me also, consumedly. For the rest, Mr. Mencken's always admirable prose style now that the 'twenties have ended seems to be, if a little subdued, far more adroit than ever. And I question if any person writing at any time, or within any known civic limits, has ever hit upon a manner

of writing better suited to convey to his readers, precisely and lucidly and memorably, whatsoever Mr. Mencken wills to convey. Mr. Mencken has evolved his own medium, in a language which no one else has written: his imitators have over well proved to us that no one else can handle this medium: but he, the incomparable, he controls it perfectly.

Meanwhile, I have said that after reading an issue of the *American Mercury* you would really imagine that Mr. Mencken found the world an unsatisfactory place. Indeed, in every book which he has published you may note his general views concerning all earth and its fauna to be as frank as they are unflattering. Yet, after I had finished this *Treatise on the Gods* (a volume which, as I repeat, in so many ways epitomizes all Mencken), I laid the book aside, and with a mind still colored by the rich lore of its many cosmogonal legends, I fell a-wondering.

I wondered what, after all, would happen if, with this scurvy planet annihilated, H. L. Mencken were left a really free hand in the construction of some better world. I imagined him in precisely the position of the Demiurge in Genesis I. Doubtless, I meditated, the waters would be duly separated from

the earth, and the sun kindled in the firmament, and the rest of the original program would be followed out for some twenty-five verses, with a beer garden pleasantly established among the four rivers. I really could not imagine, though, this Demiurge remarking: "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness." He would not care, I thought, and perhaps not even he would be bold enough, to undertake the supervising of a worldful of Menckens. He would need congressmen and schoolmasters and Rotarians and ecclesiastics as an ogre needs food. Existence would appear unsupportable without an occasional Coolidge; nor in the heaven of Jahveh-Mencken could multitudinous choirs of cherubim, performing the very best German music, quite so tickle his hearing as once did the beloved inanities of William Lyon Phelps and Herbert C. Hoover and Bishop James Cannon, Jr. In brief, I thought that Jahveh-Mencken would create no Garden of Eden, but the United States of America, as it now exists; and that after some short struggle with his conscience he would divinely endow his chosen people with prohibition also. "*Odi et amo,*" he would murmur in the while that he shaped his bold grotesqueries of *agents provocateurs* and of rum hounds and of tin-

pot Loyolas and of Baptist dervishes, and assigned to them their varying rôles in yet another farce which piously justified his existence. Then Jahveh-Mencken, I reflected, would see that all was very good; and, after bringing tobacco also into being, then he would rest upon the seventh day, with his large blue eyes appraising fondly his gaudy and rambunctious handiwork in the way of noble swine.

Yet I thought, too, that perhaps something would be lacking, even then, to his utter contentment. I thought that by-and-by he would recall that droll brief time upon Earth when H. L. Mencken and all his unhallowed works were under a sharp fire of popguns from a straggling coalition between the incompetent and the ossified. He would remember that envying idiocy which once, when Earth yet twirled through space, was for a tiny while so twaddled about as the "new humanism." He would chuckle then, I knew. And I fancied that this Demiurge would very happily begin to make, for his supernal delectation, yet more "new humanists" by the hundreds. I fancied that from no cosmogony shaped after the true desires of Jahveh-Mencken could one omit the windy pedagogue and the mental eunuch turned doctrinaire, — the, as it were,

Gelehrten, or, as one might say, the virtuosi of literary *Kanondelicatessen,* the merchants of palpable nonsense, the native boshmongers, the boob bumpers, the campus critics and all other such sad, sinister buffoons.

X

DOOM OF THE DIZAIN

A Note as to the Real Trouble

"SO is it that, speaking always under the correction of time, I would say this is a generation destined quite quickly to be huddled away, by man's common-sense, into oblivion."

X — Doom of the Dizain

I HAVE THUS FAR SAID DISPERSEDLY CERTAIN THINGS which I believe may be fairly said in defence of the American writers of the 'twenties when we appraise them one by one. I have spoken with the greater freedom because of my assured knowledge that all defence was unavailing where the impairments of time collaborated steadfastly with our human hunger for variety. We want, in brief, new writers. We want them for such reasons as have not any large connection with the demerits of their immediate precessors. Our need is for new writers who will differ from the American novelists of the 'twenties not in degree but in kind.

For I return now (in the more congenial rôle of public prosecutor) to my dizain of the doomed. I regard them, once more, collectively. With the varying talents of these authors I take no longer any concern. An honest judge may consider only that which they have in common, in agreeing to their common demolition. And he needs, I think, but one

frank instant of juridic meditation to reveal a sufficing number of shared misdemeanors.

I at least perceive that the fatal fault shared by all the writers about whom I have been talking is that each has veraciously depicted human life as he or she, the individual, saw this human life, irrespective of any other standards and hearsays, howsoever new or time honored. This was true even of Elinor Wylie, who prettified the clothes and the conversation of her characters but never their interior human failings. Each writer has, in brief, put faith in his or her own individualism. Their common revolt has not been (as fools prattle, and as the "new humanist" repeats religiously) against the restrictions of American life, but against Babbitt, the ever-cautious and eternal conformist. I pause here to forestall a not impossible error by explaining that I do not refer to Mr. Irving Babbitt of Cambridge, but again to Mr. George F. Babbitt of Zenith.

Now it is perfectly true that, while individualism may perhaps not be the best possible basis for enduring literature, it is the only basis thus far discovered. Great books are not written by rule; they are written by men of genius. And whether he have genius or not, the sincere artist must perforce ren-

der life, if he set about the affair sanely, from the point of view of a special individual, because, after all, that is the only viewpoint from which he has ever observed it.

It is true also that no concededly great writer is ever praised upon the ground that he conformed to great models. To the contrary, it has long been the very eloquent custom of mankind to shape from each concededly great writer's name, whensoever its form at all permitted, an adjective — such as Miltonic or Shakespearean or Homeric — to denote those qualities which were his individually, inseparably, and, as things human fare, immortally. Those qualities may have been very few; the fact that there are relatively few diamonds to be found in nature does not impair our esteem of diamonds. It was those qualities alone, the qualities wherein he differed from other persons, which rendered the man both individual and memorable. Homer endures, in brief, because nobody else has ever managed to be Homeric. As in the old figure, there are but a few inches difference between a dwarf and a giant; yet those few inches do make the giant.

This much, then, let us admit in fairness to the condemned, may be said in favor of individualism

— that it is the only known basis for great literature. We can admit this willingly. For the point is that we do not desire any more great literature, at this barbarous price, because of our clear perception that here, as in every other field of American activity, individualism has become the enemy of our general comfort. You may have observed perhaps the vast regimentation of America in 1917, when on a sudden every action of life fell under legal supervision, and everybody discovered how comfortable it was upon the whole to be told flatly what to do and what not to do, without being bothered to think about it. Each patriot then tasted the pleasures of slavery; each patriot exercised the will to refrain, tumultuously, and fell to surrendering every sort of personal liberty with whoops of delight. Nor was it in human nature to give over these pleasures, once the Hun was discomfited; as the drug addict cries out for an increased dosage, so have all better-thought-of Americans demanded more and yet more laws to rid them of the discomforts of self-dependence.

Well, and the point is, I repeat, that in this legal atmosphere has now been reared an entire new generation. It remembers no other atmosphere; it

can breathe none other with comfort. We are, it is said, a nation of law-breakers; but to the one law that we break, we obey and we are trammeled by a hundred laws, every day of our lives, in the form of trivial ever-present restrictions which but twenty years ago were unheard of and unimaginable. The new American, to his continuing ease and well-being, has thus evolved the slave-mind, which requires as a plain necessity some extraneous guidance and extraneous mastery, to preserve decorum everywhere. What he requires and what he enjoys, as in Baltimore a shrewd philosopher has noted, is the well-governed security of a trusty in the penitentiary.

It was inevitable that the new American should have hailed the coming of the book clubs to lay down the law for him concerning what he should read: these book clubs freed him, even in his literary excursions, from the discomforts of self-dependence. It appears equally natural that in his prescribed reading-matter he should relish, as in every other department of life, set laws to be obeyed and depended upon. And here the " new humanists " are ready for the new American with irresistible lures. For, as Mr. Babbitt has phrased it for us — and this

time I mean Mr. Irving Babbitt, — " the humanist also exercises the will to refrain. Decorum is supreme for the humanist." Thus amicably does like call to like, very much as when toward evening, in yet other twilit fields, the sleepy gelding whinnies affably to his fellows.

The thoughtful will perceive, also, that this incivic individualism has begotten in these aforesaid writers of the 'twenties yet another stark fault: each has failed, and has even failed ostentatiously, to suggest any panacea for the inherent ills of human living. It was their melancholy privilege to see with the eyes of maturity the world's civilization collapse like a popped paper bag. Their juniors yet had time to forget; their elders were well past learning anything. They only had seen with the eyes of maturity poor human nature left naked in every quarter of earth and gibbering in a fashion to embarrass any ape that had heard of Darwin. None of these writers, I suspect, has ever quite recovered from the spectacle; before its terrors some turned away to pessimism and the others to a resolute frivolity, but each one of them first saw that there is no cure for being human and not any recipe for human living. That perception was perhaps unavoidable. What has fol-

lowed, though, is that no one of these writers has peddled any recipe such as archbishops might smile on and pedagogues applaud.

To the contrary, as I was reading but the other day, " this generation of writers has offered no convictions alive enough to straighten the disordered pattern of our lives, no sure direction that we can take with comfort, no centrality, and no doctrine. To the generation of rising young novelists, Mr. Cabell and his fellows bequeath fine words and a bucket of ashes."

I like the moral tone of that, and, within limits, I commend the ideal contents also. For really that lack of a panacea is quite fatal to all literary pretensions. Man, breathing so precariously in the close shadow of death, and noting always the approach of the unknowable, needs vitally some strong belief in one or another cure-all, very much as a child fretting in the night needs paregoric. And almost any panacea will do — even our " new humanism " will do, we fondly think, at a pinch, — so long as the more happily obtuse of men can be hoodwinked into believing that tomorrow this talked-about panacea will begin to work, and everything will be put in apple-pie order everywhere. For it is the belief which

matters: it is the belief which drugs. But these writers of the 'twenties have offered us nothing in especial to believe in, — and that, too, when almost any sort of polite lie would have served our despairing need.

It will follow, in every likelihood, that all these writers whom I have discussed will presently be forgotten. Here, though, I have not any thought of essaying the thankless rôle of prophet. I would but remark (again, in mere fairness to the condemned) that the decade which produces even one writer of enduring importance is rare: the 'twenties produced at least ten American writers who for at least a little while have seemed important. That is a fair average: it is by a great deal the best average as yet attained by any decade in American letters.

In fine, the ten nominees for oblivion at whom I have glanced in these pages have given to us, during the 'twenties, such remarkably various and such as yet remarkably vital writings as are these books, chosen almost at random:—*Jennifer Lorn; The Venetian Glass Nephew; The Hard-Boiled Virgin; The Short Story's Mutations; A Lost Lady; Death Comes for the Archbishop; Barren Ground; The Romantic Comedians; They Stooped to Folly; An*

American Tragedy; Winesburg, Ohio; The Triumph of the Egg; Babbitt; Main Street; The Bright Shawl; Quiet Cities; Balisand; The American Language; Treatise on the Gods; and the several volumes of *Prejudices.*

That is an impressive list. It is a list to which, in any complete appraising of this now senescent generation's labors, must be added several other books (by these same writers and by yet other writers) quite as seriously conceived and as painstakingly fashioned. It is a list to which, if only for the reasons that I have cited, time may very well grudge immortality, as touches some of and indeed perhaps all its constituents. Concerning that matter only the pedant and the imbecile will pretend to any present certainty. Meanwhile I have here recorded a list to which the rational cannot deny respect. I now remind you that of the dead 'twenties, in any case, Babbitt remains.

Babbitt remains as one of those happy accidents through which a character passes from the pages of a book into our race consciousness, as with Sherlock Holmes and Mrs. Grundy and Pecksniff. It is wholly salutary to reflect that the decade which was in revolt against Babbitt has availed to immortalize

him. For in any outcome Babbitt remains, the ever-cautious and eternal conformist, blessed with the slave-mind which at every instant "exercises the will to refrain" and to which "decorum is supreme."

That Babbitt should at this present moment be writing his own brand of literary criticism, under any number of pen names, is but a very minor part of his multifarious activities. Nor, upon reflection, can I see that it at all matters.

It does not matter, because at no moment since the will to refrain was first exercised in Moab, by Balaam's inspired ass, has Babbitt lacked for impressive words with which to defend the wisdom of timidity. Before today has Babbitt very often been a schoolmaster of prime importance, and very often has he appeared pre-eminent among literary critics also, in the long while since he spoke for the first time.

As a rule, he has spoken with logic and authority. His research work has been thorough. He has missed indeed only the main fact about literature, — that great books are not written by rule, but by men of genius. So has it come about that through many generations, in every cultured realm and

under the superior frauds of every polity, the better-thought-of tax-payers have listened with warm spiritual comfort to Babbitt's rulings upon all questions of literary art, and only the literary artist has ignored him.

EXPLICIT

Richmond-in-Virginia
14 April 1930

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Some of us